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# Dedicated by nature

## *'Raptor guy' has banded thousands of hawks, owls and eagles*

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Imagine your mission in life is to save as many of a certain endangered group as you can. Picture the members of this group beating you up every chance they get. Would you still return to this difficult and dangerous task year after year?

North Andover resident Jack Holt does, and has, for most of his 66 years, despite being rammed and clawed by the raptors he is determined to band. Ascending to heights of as much as 115 feet up rickety, swaying trees in his special harness and climbing spikes, Holt is one of a very small group of naturalists willing to risk it all for America's raptors.

Protecting their nestlings from the human invader, determined great horned and barred owl mothers regularly give Holt a solid thrashing for his efforts, as do most of the raptors he bands.

"The only birds that don't beat up on me at the nest are the eagles," says Holt.

Eagles watch Holt from the air, but don't dive down on him when he's banding their young, the way the owls do. Catch a mature, migrating bald eagle in netting and try to band him and that's another story.

"Adult migrating bald eagles will fight you as you try to band them, and they can do serious damage," says Holt. "Even at eight or nine weeks the nestlings peck and claw at you constantly."

Holt says after so many years of concentrating on banding bald eagles he would love to spend more time studying the golden eagle.

"In my opinion it's a far superior bird to the bald eagle," says Holt. "I like them a lot better than bald eagles. Their whole attitude, and the way they carry themselves. They're very regal - like a true monarch. The bald eagle is like a wrestler, sort of catch as catch can. They became our national symbol because they're an American bird.

"Once you have a firm grip on adult golden eagles they calm down. They'll look at you eye to eye and not try to peck you. They're like a big baby in your arms."

But Holt's main concentration for many years has been the banding of bald eagles, in addition to the many hawks and owls he bands. Why put yourself through this danger and uncertainty year after year? Holt is working to band as many raptors as he can as part of the fight to save America's endangered species, and the best way to do it is to band the young birds in their nests before they learn to fly.

"Banding gives us certain parameters to operate under when studying these eagles, how long they live and how far they travel," says Holt. "You can learn a lot more from a banded bird than an unbanded bird."

A red-tailed hawk banded by Holt in Pennsylvania in 1975 was caught in 1995 in New York. Another red-tailed hawk, a female rehabilitated by a friend of Holt's, was identified by her band as the first mate of the famous Pale Male in New York City.

[This week media reports indicate that Pale Male and his current mate Lola, famous for nesting at a large apartment building on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, are moving. The red-tails are building themselves a large new nest at the Beresford on Central Park West. Other famous residents of the Beresford are Jerry Seinfeld, Helen Gurley Brown and Glenn Close.]

Holt says even as a toddler in North Andover, where he has lived all his life, he was interested in finding baby birds and bringing them home to hand-raise. He says he didn't have much luck raising swallows and robins, so he started looking for kestrels.

It was ornithology professor Oscar M. Root of Brooks School who became his mentor.

"I knew what his car looked like, so I would find him," says Holt. "I was the obnoxious little brat who tagged along with him [on birding expeditions.] He got me into banding hawks and owls in their nests. When I was at North Andover High School he took me out to band birds and I played hooky."

After high school, Holt headed to New Jersey for the fall raptor migration on an ancient motor scooter.

"It blew up in Hartford, Conn.," says Holt. "Some kind people took me the rest of the way."

He moved up to a better bike. Later his dad gave him an old Jeep and he was in business.

Holt was also serious about photography during his high school years, but eventually concentrated on bird banding and writing about it. With well-known nature photographer G. Ronald Austing he created "The World of the Great Horned Owl," an impressive set of Austing owl photos with some photos by Holt, who did most of the writing.

Former North Andover resident Michael Goriansky, who spent 10 years helping Holt build owl nests for various species of local owls, worked at getting Holt the recognition he feels he deserves. As a result of Goriansky's efforts, Holt was awarded the Green Seal Award from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. The award reads "In recognition of your lifelong research work on owls and raptors, and in appreciation of your invaluable contribution to the protection of biodiversity in Massachusetts."

Holt was once featured in a special National Geographic magazine under people with "Odd Jobs."

He also writes articles for The Owls Nest newsletter.

North Andover poet Karen Kline met Holt through Goriansky and invited him to join the Recycling Committee during the July 4 celebration of 2004, where he set up all his climbing gear on an extra table. A 4-year-old girl told her mom she had just talked to "the raptor guy" and in some circles the nickname has persisted.

"He's a hidden gem for this town," says Kline about Holt. "He's not known nearly well enough for the wonderful work he's always done for this town. He does this selflessly. He's a total nature person. His bottom line is to get out and save as many birds as possible."

Over a lifetime of working to save raptors, Holt has achieved far more than will fit into one newspaper article. He spent 10 years on the Chesapeake Eagle Project and has constructed 30 great horned owl nests in parks near Cincinnati, Ohio. Every year he holds a banding party in his back yard, where 30 or more people congregate on the third week in April.

On the first day of spring each year he heads off to Ohio for this project, getting back in the middle of April just in time to band local barred and great horned owls. On May 15, he's off to Michigan to band bald eagles, a project that is his main source of income. This banding lasts through early June.

Each fall since 1960 Holt has visited two migrant bird-trapping stations, one in Ontario, and one in northeastern Pennsylvania. During the fall he bands sharp-shinned hawks.

"I used to band 156 birds a day," says Holt. Over my career I have banded about 8,000 sharp-shinned hawks and 7,000 red-tails."

During the winter Holt goes bird watching at Plum Island and other local areas for raptors like snowy owls and saw whet owls.

He is still concerned over the welfare of the nation's eagle population. A 20-year toxicology study on eagles show that although DDT counts have fallen over the past 10 years, heavy metals and mercury are still in the birds' blood and that's not all.

"There are still plenty of PCBs to go around," says Holt. "DDT counts may be dropping, but there are still plenty of things to take their place."

On June 17 this year, while he was banding a goshawk, Holt was strafed by the mother bird and blinded in one eye. At this point it is uncertain whether he will ever see out of that eye again.

"I never liked goshawks," says Holt. "To me, they are just another obstacle [to banding their offspring.]"

Before the goshawk incident, Holt was signed up to trap golden eagles in Montana this fall. Now he's not sure what's going to happen.

"I think I can still climb," says Holt about his chances of continuing his lifelong passion. "Dodging mother great horned and barred owls if I can't see them could be a problem. They say you get used to having only one eye."

As for his work on bald eagles, Holt says he's been assured a job for life, as long as he feels up to it.

"There are only a certain number of people who do this work," says Holt. "There's me in Massachusetts, a guy in California, one in Wisconsin and one in Ohio."

Holt says he will continue seeking treatment for his damaged eye this summer.